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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PINS](#) [TU](#) [IR](#)
SUBJECT: IRAN'S PRESS TV: HUNKERED DOWN AND RATIONALIZING
AWAY

REF: 2009 ISTANBUL 189

Classified By: Acting Principal Officer Win Dayton; Reason 1.5 (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The Istanbul correspondent for Iran's "Press TV" news channel (protect) told us that several pro-opposition reporters and staffers at the news channel have quit their jobs and left Iran, but a majority of the "Green Movement" supporters on the staff are still working there. They are "hunkered down", having been warned that anyone who strays from the regime's constricting editorial line would be fired, though our contact claimed that some reporters are pushing back in subtle ways against the regime's control of Press TV coverage. Comment: If the remaining pro-Green Movement staffers at Press TV are genuinely trying to press back against the regime's one-sided press coverage of internal Iranian politics, they are doing it too subtly for us to notice. End Summary.

¶2. (C) ConGen Istanbul's NEA Iran Watcher met January 6 with the Istanbul correspondent for "Press TV", Iran's 24-hour English-language satellite news channel. We asked our long-standing contact (a UK national) whether Press TV operations have been impacted by the Iranian election results and ongoing clashes between opposition supporters and the regime. (As reported in reftel, many of Press TV's international correspondents and Tehran-based editorial staff were openly pro-Mousavi before the elections).

¶3. (C) Our contact said that in the first several weeks following the elections a number of Press TV staff had marched in opposition to the results and several were injured in clashes with police. Concurrent with tightening regime measures against the opposition, Press TV managers (who report to the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting agency, IRIB) issued an ultimatum threatening to fire employees who questioned the election results, participated in demonstrations, or allowed their reporting to be colored by pro-opposition views. Our contact said that several Press TV staffers quit and left Iran. Most staff who did so were able to because they came from wealthy families and had European visas. A small handful of Tehran-based reporters and editors arranged overseas assignments for themselves, including a friend of our contact's who gave up her own on-air news show in Tehran in order to take a London assignment with Press TV. Several weeks after arriving in London, according to our contact, she quit her Press TV job and was hired by BBC Persian.

¶4. (C) The majority of Press TV staff who were Mousavi supporters, however, have stayed on at the news channel and "hunkered down." They are still quietly supporting the opposition movement while producing news that fits within the IRIB's editorial redlines, our contact asserted. She claimed that Press TV management had originally ordered reporters not

to cover anti-regime demonstrations, but the news editors persuaded the management that failing to do so could lead broadcasting regulators in key countries like Germany and the United Kingdom to pull Press TV from the airwaves for failure to meet objective news reporting standards. Given the importance Press TV (and IRIB) managers assign to generating and retaining foreign audiences in key European capitals, the managers reportedly relented and allowed Press TV to report on demonstrations provided the reports did not imply any government culpability for the violence. Thus, our contact pointed out that Press TV's coverage of the Ashura demonstrations last month included footage of injured protesters and burning vehicles, as well as footage of protesters holding up helmets and batons seized from police, but shied away from assessing any blame (on either side). Our contact claimed that this was but one example of many small, subtle ways in which Pro-Mousavi staffers at Press TV are pressing back against the regime's bitterly one-sided press coverage of internal Iranian politics, without risking their jobs.

15. (C) Erring on the side of caution, Press TV editors have also taken steps to protect their communications with Press TV's foreign correspondents by asking many of its foreign correspondents to communicate with the editors by Skype rather than by standard email or mobile phone. Press TV editors officially justified the move as a cost-cutting measure, but the real reason according to our contact was to allow the editors and correspondents to talk to each other candidly about the challenges of producing objective reporting in the face of far stricter IRIB editorial controls, without the risk of their discussions being monitored by either western governments or the Iranian

government. Our contact underscored the belief among Iranian journalists that communicating by Skype is more secure than almost any other electronic means, as Skype's encryption is considered superior to standard emails and cell-phones.

16. (C) The Press TV news editors' pro-reformist leanings, however, do not translate into censorship-free oversight, our contact asserted. She had prepared a story about rising tensions between Turkey's national police (considered by some to be closely aligned, politically and ideologically, to Turkey's ruling AK Party) and its military (considered still to be a largely secular and often at odds with the AK Party).

Her reporting suggested that tensions had even led on occasion to confrontations between police and military units as a result of police efforts to search military special-forces barracks for evidence of anti-government plotting. Our contact's video report originally included assertions that the searches had resulted in several (isolated) physical confrontations between members of the police and special-forces units, based on testimony from her own contacts. Press TV editors refused to run the story with that claim included, because they were afraid of highlighting a scenario -- internal strife between police and military units -- that could "give inspiration" to police units in Iran opposed to the Iranian IRGC's use of repressive tactics against demonstrators, she told us. Our Press TV contact agreed to remove that claim from her report, which aired on Press TV on January 5.

17. (C) Comment: Given its reliance on fluent English-language speaking reporters and editors, Press TV has always been the most internationally-oriented of any Iranian-government-controlled media outlet. Not surprisingly, this orientation coincided with a pro-reformist (Khatami then Mousavi) worldview among most staff members prior to the elections (reftel). However, it is also not surprising that IRIB is now keeping Press TV on a very tight leash, given the extreme lengths to which the regime has gone to control press coverage of ongoing anti-government protests since the elections. Despite our contact's assertions otherwise, our recent review of the content of Press TV coverage of domestic Iranian politics revealed no clear example of any latent push-back against the regime's harsh press-line regarding opposition demonstrations (or for that

matter against the regime's adversarial press-line against the west in general). If the remaining pro-Mousavi staffers at Press TV are genuinely trying to press back against the regime's one-sided press coverage of internal Iranian politics, they are doing it too subtly for us to notice. More likely is that the fear of job loss or other reprisal against journalistic dissent at Press TV and other Iranian media outlets under the regime's control remains overriding at present, and any journalists brave enough to dissent are doing it well away from the office. End comment.
DAYTON